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HOW  
Close  
To War  
In '54?

By Chalmers M. Roberts



The writer, who retired last summer as senior diplomatic correspondent of The Washington Post, covered the 1954 Geneva conference on Indochina.

JUST HOW SERIOUSLY did the United States consider military intervention in Indochina in 1954? The publication of the Pentagon Papers—first in the newspapers and more recently in the 43-volume official edition published as 12 books by the House Armed Services Committee—has made the historian's task in answering that question both easier and more difficult.

It is easier because there is now available a mass of new material on the key year 1954, as well as for many other years. Much of it is confirmatory, of course, but there are new bits and pieces, and above all a sense of the urgency with which events were perceived at the time.

It is more difficult because the new documents do not resolve all the outstanding questions that have been raised in the many books and articles written about the period. And while the possibility that a key piece of the puzzle may still be withheld through censorship cannot be ruled out, a close reading of Books 9 and 10 of the House edition which cover this period leaves the impression that the censors were wholly capricious.

From the 859 pages dealing with 1953 and 1954 (and these are pages of documents, not the analyst's summation) the censors cut out seven items covering 18 pages. In Book 9, however,

the censor did not cut out the summaries of the five documents excised but in Book 10 the summaries were cut out for the two documents omitted. It so happens that among the Pentagon Papers made available to The Washington Post are copies of the five documents from Book 9.

The Pentagon's explanation of the "declassified review" (printed in each book) states that "some of the material has been declassified solely on the basis of prior disclosures." Yet one of the excised documents was printed in full in the New York Times. Furthermore, it was simply an advance report from Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith in Geneva to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in Washington on an important Associated Press dispatch written by Seymour Topping, now a New York Times editor. The more significant telegram from Smith to Dulles on the following day revealing Topping's Chinese Communist source is included in the book! (The informant, incidentally, was Huang Hua who is the new Peking ambassador to Canada and who may be the first envoy to Washington.)

Another censored document recounts a Dulles conversation at Geneva with Britain's Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. This cable reflects Dulles' unhappiness with Eden and British policy but far less so than some of the printed telegrams. Still another excised message, from Dulles in Paris to Washington, in July of 1954, details the agreed U.S.-French position just before the end of the Geneva conference but there is nothing in it that has not long ago been known and widely printed.

Finally, the other two excised documents of which The Post has copies deal with American conversations with two French generals, Paul Ely and Jean Valluy. Both were Pentagon conversations, both were pessimistic but neither is remarkable.

A note should be added here about the issue of codes. At the time the Nixon administration went to court to pre-censor publication of the Pentagon Papers there was much talk that their use in toto would compromise cryptographic codes because the messages gave exact dates and times and cable control numbers. But the censors excised none of this information from the hundreds of messages printed.

Nor did the censors eliminate American officials' assessments of Chou En-lai's performance at Geneva; though Chou soon is to be President Nixon's host in Peking.

An Offer By Ike

ON THE CENTRAL question of how close the Eisenhower administration came to military intervention in 1954, Book 10 includes a then-Top Secret summary by Dulles on "French Requests Involving Possible United States Belligerency in Indochina." In it he listed, and detailed, April 4, 23 and 24 as "the three occasions when French officials suggested United States armed intervention in Indochina." Dulles' summary, drafted on Aug. 3, just after Geneva had produced a cease-fire, states American "conditions" for intervention (never fulfilled) but does not go beyond that—perhaps because the draft was intended for publication although it never was published in this form.

This summary, however, does add something. Dulles stated that on May 11, four days after the fall of Dienbienphu and three days after the Geneva conference opened, the French were "advised" that President Eisenhower "would be disposed to ask Congress for authority to use the armed forces of the United States" under certain conditions. This "possibility," said Dulles on Aug. 3, "lapsed" on June 20 when France decided to accept the cease-fire that took another month to negotiate.

Numerous French writers, most notably Philippe Devilliers and Jean Lacouture in "End of a War," have detailed the French pleas for intervention. American writers such as John Robinson Beal in "John Foster Dulles" have told it from the American side. Most recently Robert F. Randle, a Columbia University professor, in "Geneva 1954," has taken something of a revisionist line. Randle concluded that Dulles in fact was vetoing the intervention plans of Adm. Arthur Radford, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and he wrote that "my analysis and conclusions differ substantially from those of Mr. Roberts" in The Post and in a widely reprinted Reporter magazine piece titled "The Day We Didn't Go to War."

In reading the Dulles telegrams against my own accounts and memories of many conversations with Dulles and others at the time I still have no doubt that he wanted to intervene to "save" Indochina from communism. He was stopped, essentially, by two factors: the Democratic congressional leaders who insisted (as did the Republicans as well) on allies, and by Eden, who refused, with Prime Minister Churchill's full backing, to let Britain be the key ally in any "united action."